

**It's 100 years since the first branch of Soroptimists International was set up. CHRIS DUNNE finds out about the work of the Cork branch.**



**CHRIS DUNNE**

THIS month marks the 100th birthday of Soroptimists International. It's a significant milestone for the worldwide organisation for women who want to improve the lives of other women and girls.

The very first Soroptimist club was set up in Oakland, California in 1921 - but now there are 75,000 members all over the globe - including Cork.

Cork president of Soroptimists International, Tess Hogan, from Blackrock, said: "In this country our 16 clubs work in partnership with our communities to enhance the lives of women and girls."

What is a Soroptimist and how does one join the sisterhood?

"Being a Soroptimist is a way of life, using our influence in all walks of life to empower women to use their full potential," says Tess, who worked as nurse in the South Infirmary and who managed the pathology laboratory there before she retired six years ago.

Is she enjoying her retirement?

"I am enjoying it to the full," says Tess.

"I live with my sister, Phyl, and I like to walk, do a bit of gardening and to visit my friends when there are no restrictions."

She likes Cork.

*"As a native of the country village of Castletownroche, I missed being saluted by everyone at first in Cork, but that soon changed!"*

There were a couple of restrictions when Tess trained as a nurse.

"Back then, you had to live in and there were lights out at 10pm!

Four of the Hogan family worked in the South Infirmary. Tess has another family in the Soroptimists organisation.

"Through our local clubs, our National Executive, and the Soroptimist International Voice at the United Nations, we are working to implement the Sustainable Development Goals. The year 20/21 has certainly been a different one," says Tess.

*"We missed meeting up in person during the pandemic, but we did so virtually, by mail, and by phone.*

"I joined up in 1985 and others came along. I have made great friends over the years both at home and abroad."

Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGB) has 6,000 members in 270 clubs in 18 countries including Great Britain, Ireland, and countries in Asia, America, the Caribbean and Malta, who work at a local, national and international level to educate, empower and enable women and girls.

"You can join us," says Tess, who believes in inclusivity.

"Any female can apply to join us online."

Councillor Deirdre Forde is a member of the Soroptimists.

"You don't refuse Tess!" says Deirdre.

*"She is a mighty woman who has contributed so much to good works over the years. Tess was honoured for 36 years of membership. We had a lovely day out."*

The Soroptimists organisation is a bit like the Chamber of Commerce.

"It is low key and a little off the public radar," says Deirdre.

"It could do with new young blood like many organisations can. The structure is there; it is national, international and global. In my experience, in society today if you reach a certain age you may be perceived as not being fit for anything or good for nothing.

"We all know that is the truth and the Soroptimists organisation know that is the truth. The Soroptimists don't recognise ageism," says Deirdre.

"They have helped so many causes and helped good works by fundraising over the years. They help people in need and supported members working in Africa to better the lives of girls and women there through education.

"The Soroptimists hold formal meetings and social meetings where great friendships are made. We welcome everybody, young professionals, retired people, people of any age who want to bring their own unique skills to the table."

How do they raise funds for good works?

"They hold competitions like debating competitions, they organise walking events and coffee mornings. Some of the women have great stories to tell," says Deirdre.

*"We have an ex-ballet dancer who is a great raconteur! The members have a wonderful history. They are all educated and they do Trojan work."*

To mark the 100 year centenary, the Cork branch plan on planting some trees. Celebrations continue elsewhere too.

"In Dungarvan, the members there are putting benches out in the town to mark our 100 years. That is a nice idea," said Tess.

It was a nice idea to start the Cork Youth orchestra back in 1956.

"That was a wonderful project," says Tess. "It was eventually taken over by the parents.

"St Joachim and Anne's, housing for the elderly, was another worthwhile project we were involved in. We had flag days and church collections and arranged walks to help fundraise. And we founded the Caring for Carers organisation which is now Family Carers Ireland".

Tess is recruiting for the Soroptimists.

"We are always looking for new members," she says.

"There is a yearly fee that we pay to the Federation. Our national meeting took place over zoom during the pandemic. The Cork branch usually met pre-Covid in the Address Hotel every month, previously called The Ambassador."

Can anyone join up?

"You can join us!" says Tess. "We'd love to have you!"

New blood flows through the Soroptimists.

"Our incoming President is a Bandon lady, Miriam Murphy Woods," says Tess.

"The International President is an American lady, Sharon Fisher."

Tess has served as Cork President before.

"It is often hard to get people to be on the committee," she says.

*"As President in 1995-96 I visited every club in Ireland and hosted an annual lunch. It was great to meet all the people."*

Tess has another ambition.

"I want to get rid of the chain!" she says laughing.

But isn't the presidential chain a sign of power and popularity?

"It's my 5th or 6th time!"

So she says enough already?

"Ah, it'd be nice for someone new to be president," says Tess.

Is Tess's sister Phyl, a member of the Soroptimists?

"No, she is my secretary and that's enough!" says Tess.

That is an important role too.

"In the Soroptimists organisation, every woman is important."

**CHRIS DUNNE**

Echo Live.